

## **"Time Crime"--Theft of Historic Resources**

- Two men outfit a boat to scoop up Civil War relics from a river bottom and sell them, but the Commonwealth of Virginia owns the relics. The men are liable for grand larceny and the US Army Corps of Engineers might prosecute, too, for illegal dredging.
- Advertisements appear on the Internet Ebay auction site for artifacts from a Civil War shipwreck in the Chesapeake Bay. First the FBI and then the state police investigate the matter and discover that state-owned artifacts are being sold illegally.
- Several people get together to dig up Native American graves on private property, with the owner's permission. They find that the dead were buried with many shell, bead, and copper ornaments, which the diggers remove to sell. Despite the landowner's permission, these people are liable for a felony, and possible federal crimes as well because the relics are transported across state lines and offered for sale.
- Three men enter a farm at night without the owner's permission to dig for Civil War artifacts at an old camp site. The owner calls the police, who arrest the men for trespassing, vandalism, and larceny, and one man is also arrested for carrying a concealed firearm. This man said that he required "protection" in case he was confronted by a landowner or a law enforcement officer.

These examples point to a widespread problem in Virginia with the vandalism to and theft (or looting) of historic resources. Instances range from illegally unearthing graves and stealing tombstones from cemeteries to raiding Civil War battlefields and disturbing shipwrecks. Looters feel that they can pursue their illegal business because law enforcement officers generally are unaware of the problem.

In June 2002, the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, with assistance from the Department of Historic Resources' Portsmouth Regional Office, held the most recent Time Crime workshop. Sponsored by the Virginia Department of Transportation's Suffolk District, VDOT staff as well as law enforcement officers from Petersburg, Virginia Beach, and Sussex County



*Reeva Tilley and Mary Wade, Virginia Council on Indians, and Catherine Slusser, DHR, examine artifacts removed illegally from Native American graves in Wythe County.*

participated in a free four-hour training program that illustrated the nature of the theft and vandalism problem, summarized applicable state and federal laws, offered investigative guidelines for detecting and arresting "thieves of time," and concluded with case studies of recent investigations.

Since the program's inception in 1995 through the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, over 3,000 law enforcement officers, local government staff, college students, and members of archaeological and historical organizations have received training through presentations and workshops. If interested in learning more about this unique program, contact your nearest Department of Historic Resources regional office archaeologist:

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